

There's No One Quite Like You by LiaGwriter

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Summary: After another day of unbearable writer's block, Mike heads to his favourite used book store in an attempt to clear his mind. What he doesn't know is that his procrastination-fuelled errand is about to become the rom-com meet-cute of El Hopper's dreams.

1. Chapter 1

Hi everyone! This was originally posted as part of my one-shot collection, but I decided to expand it into its own three-part story. The original prompt was: AU - Mileven meeting at a bookstore. Setting is still the '80s, but Mike & El are in their mid-20s. Enjoy!

Mike slammed the stack of books down on the counter, coughing as a cloud of dust swirled up in their wake. He glanced at the attendant, a guy about his age named Dan, who he'd gotten to know pretty well over the three years he'd been coming to the used bookstore. Dan leaned across the counter and looked down at the box by Mike's feet with a weary expression.

"This just the first batch?" he asked, gesturing to the books in front of him. Mike nodded. "You're lucky you're a regular, Mike. You know it's usually a 10-book maximum drop-off *per* visit."

Mike had started coming to Maple Street Books to write; it was always quiet, with just a few tables and mismatched chairs scattered between the creaky wooden stacks. He found he got his best work done there, surrounded by hundreds of novels, textbooks, essay collections and more, each with a storied history that preceded his own.

Mike sighed, lifting a few more books from his box. "I know, and I *really* appreciate it. I'm procrastinating today."

The truth was, procrastination was a generous term: he had *full on* writer's block, the worst it had been since the final stages of his first novel. Now that he was approaching the end of his second, he wondered if it was going to become a pattern for the rest of his career.

It would've been fine if he wasn't putting so much pressure on himself this time around. His first book, a science fiction tale about small-town kids caught in the wrath of a supernatural being from a nearby government lab, had done pretty well for its limited release. The

publishing house, at least, had thought it successful enough to offer Mike another book deal. Riding the high of having actually been published in the first place, he'd accepted it immediately.

But the plot he'd woven in the past few months was much more complex, and darker in a way that had been more emotionally taxing than he could've ever expected. Plus, at the encouragement (read: strong suggestion) of his agent, he'd thrown in a romantic sub-plot, which was turning out to be the thing giving him the most trouble. *Probably because of your nonexistent love life*, he'd thought more than once, dejected. Either way, Mike was banking on this novel to be the one to push him into the big – or at least bigger – leagues; something that might allow him to quit his monotonous lab tech job and focus on writing full time.

That was the dream. But right now, the reality was that he needed to get out of the house and go somewhere comfortable and familiar, where he could hopefully shake off the writer's block – and if he couldn't get anything on the page, he could at least support the store by giving back in the form of donated literature.

He pulled out a couple more books, heaving them onto the counter. He paused afterwards, catching his breath for a moment. *God, I really need to start going to the gym.* He was about to dip back into the box when he noticed a woman standing next to him. She must've sidled up slowly, because her presence nearly startled him. He watched as she tilted her head to the side and frowned, reading the titles on the spines of the books Mike had just plunked down.

"Excuse me, are these for sale?"

She propped her forearm on the counter, raising an expectant eyebrow at Dan, who had his back turned, having already begun organizing the books Mike had given him.

"Oh, uh, no. Well, not yet – he's just dropping them off," he said, twisting around to point at Mike.

The woman turned to follow Dan's gaze and when her eyes landed on Mike, he fought the urge to flinch for a second time. She was utterly *beautiful*.

She was about a foot shorter than him, and he had to tilt his head down to look into her soft hazel eyes. Her friendly smile was framed by short brown hair, and Mike looked in what was probably an embarrassing stupor as she reached to tuck a honey-hued strand of it behind her ear.

She was dressed in a large faded jean jacket and an olive-green turtleneck that made the hazel in her eyes glint in a way that rendered Mike speechless. He watched the woman's expression change to one of confusion and he blushed deeply, realizing he'd let the expectant silence go on far too long.

"I... well – you – do you want one?"

It was far from the suave sentence he'd been forming in his head, but something about her mere presence made him return to middle school-level shyness. *Not that I've ever been good at talking to pretty girls*, Mike thought fleetingly.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Dan frown. "I thought you were donating these, Mike."

Crap.

"Well, I mean – I technically haven't given *these* ones over yet," he said, scooping the most recent stack of books back toward him.

"Mike, that's not how – "

"Which one were you looking at?" Mike piped up quickly, trying to calm his breathing.

The woman reached toward where his arm was resting, accidentally brushing the top of his hand, and he felt himself shudder. *Keep it together, you wasteoid.*

"This one," she said, lifting up his copy of *The Shining*.

"Oh, nice! You can totally have it – I have another one at home. My sister gave it to me for Christmas, even though I already had one. Which totally wasn't her fault, she didn't realize – I mean I'm a huge Stephen King fan so I *always* pre-order his new novels, so there's no

way she would've known. But oh, man, *The Shining!* Unbelievable. Definitely one of his best so far, I mean if you know him at all, you know that – "

Something in Mike's brain urged him to come to a screeching halt when he saw the amused half smile the woman was now wearing. He cleared his throat, flushing a deep crimson. *For God's sake, what the hell is wrong with me?*

"So it's good, then?" she asked, and Mike wasn't sure if she was poking fun at him.

"More than good. It's amazing. Scary, at times, but the writing, it's – it's so intricate, and... beautiful," he trailed off, hoping it wasn't obvious that he *clearly* wasn't talking about King's words with that description.

She only smiled, turning the book over to read the back cover. Desperate not to let the moment pass, Mike reached for another book from his stack.

"But before you read that, maybe you should start with this one," he said, handing her his copy of King's *Carrie* – another accidental repeat Christmas gift.

She met his eyes again. "Yeah?"

"Yeah, it's his first novel, and honestly – "

"Sorry, Mike?" Dan cut in, sounding exasperated. "I'm going to help the next customer, okay? I'll just leave these here."

Mike only nodded, sure that Dan could tell he was already flustered.

The woman looked up at him again. "I mean, if you were going to donate these, I can pay for them. I wouldn't want to – "

"No, no please," Mike interrupted, waving his hand in an effort to seem nonchalant. "I want you to have them."

There was a hint of curiosity in her smile this time, like she was trying to figure out what his generosity was for. "Well, if you're

offering... are there any others you'd recommend?"

The request put Mike at ease. If there was one thing he could talk about with full confidence, it was literature.

They stood at the counter for the next twenty minutes, Mike rifling through the box of books he'd brought and giving what he hoped were riveting plot summaries for the ones he thought she'd be interested in. And the woman – who eventually introduced herself as El – spurred him on, asking thoughtful questions, listening intently and even laughing at some of his lame jokes.

Finally, after Mike had piled about six books in her arms, El insisted it was enough, that she wouldn't be able to carry any more in the basket on her bike. Mike took that as a chance to offer to help bring them out with her; the idea of their conversation coming to an end was nothing short of devastating, even though they'd only just met.

They walked out of the store together, Mike following El to the side of the building, where a turquoise bike with a large wicker basket was resting against the wall.

"How often do you come here, by the way? I've never seen you before," Mike said as she packed the books into the basket.

"I've only been a few times," El replied. "But I really like it. It's a great place. Kind of... inspiring."

"Do you write?" Mike asked.

"Me? Oh gosh, no... I'm not very good with words. But I love reading."

"It doesn't seem like it."

"What, that I love reading? I basically just stole a bunch of books from you," she said, laughing.

"Oh – no, I mean it doesn't seem like you're not good with words. You're very... well spoken," Mike said, cringing at how awkward the compliment sounded.

He noticed El blush a little. "Oh... thank you."

There was a pause as she grabbed her bike off the wall and steadied it. His heart racing, Mike plucked up the courage to say the words he'd been painstakingly forming in his head since they left the store.

"So, um, assuming you're going to start reading one of those books right away, I'm already curious to know what you think," he said, clearing his throat. El eyes were warm, alight with *something*, and he took it as a cue to keep going. "So I was thinking maybe... we could meet here next week, and you could give me your review – or reviews, if there's more than one."

Mike readied himself for the sting of rejection he'd become sadly accustomed to over the years, but without missing a beat, she replied, "I'd love that."

"Really?" Mike blurted before he could think.

She laughed a little as he tried to regain composure. "Yes, really."

"How about in the afternoon... around 2?"

"It's a date."

Unable to help it, Mike broke into a full-on grin. *A date. A date!* But before he could think of something not *completely embarrassing* to say, El reached up on her tiptoes and planted a kiss on his cheek. It was only a split second; her soft lips on his skin, her silky brown hair tickling his jaw, her small hand placed gingerly on his elbow.

"See you Sunday, Mike Wheeler," she said, stepping back.

Mike was frozen in place, the simple action having left him dumbfounded. By the time he snapped out of it, El had climbed onto her bike and was starting to pedal away.

"Wait!" he called, and she whipped around. "How did you know my last name?"

She paused, placing her feet on the ground. Despite the distance between them, he could see she was smirking to herself. "I recognized

you, from your author photo at the back of *The Lab*. I told you, I love reading. Especially sci-fi."

And before Mike could process her words, she was off, pedaling into the fading evening light.

He could hardly believe it. She knew who he was, had read his book, and, by the sounds of it, *enjoyed* it. A girl like *El* had liked his book – and he was going to meet up with her again, at the place he'd written most of it. Hit with a certain burst of energy, he started for home, smiling to himself and shaking his head every so often. A thought he never imagined he'd have sincerely came to him after a while: *Thank you, writer's block*. He didn't have the end of his novel yet, but he had a date. *A date with El*, he thought, and in spite of himself he broke into another grin.

2. Chapter 2

El tapped her pencil against the edge of the table, unable to contain her nervous energy. She glanced toward the door for what was probably the hundredth time in the past five minutes, the pit of anxiety in her stomach tightening when she again found no sign of Mike.

*He did technically say **around** 2, not 2 exactly*, she reminded herself, though it did little to negate the fear of being stood up. She didn't want to experience that again, especially not by Mike Wheeler, the writer whose novel she'd devoured in just one night – not to mention the kindest, smartest, *best looking* man she'd possibly ever met.

El scolded herself at that thought. She knew it was far too early to be making those kinds of declarations, but she couldn't help it. The moment Mike's dreamy dark eyes landed on hers at the counter last week, he was all she could think about; every detail of him filling each quiet moment since.

When she arrived back home after their encounter, she hadn't even been able to make it five minutes before Max, her roommate and best friend, had seen the glint in her eye and burst out laughing. "What *happened* to you?" she'd exclaimed. El didn't stand a chance at brushing it off – the evidence was etched clearly onto her face. Within moments she'd let it all spill out: how Mike had scrambled to offer book after book and given the most engaging descriptions of each one, how he walked her to her bike and seemed flustered in the cutest way possible when he asked if she wanted to meet again, and how she'd barely been able to wait until he finished to say yes.

By the time she was done, the look on Max's face reflected her worst fears: that she sounded like a *complete* lunatic. But instead, Max had leaned forward on the couch and squeezed El's knee, her face alight with possibility. "It's meant to be, El!" she'd squealed, "It was the rom-com meet-cute of your dreams!"

Her reflex had been to protest, slapping Max's hand away and insisting that wasn't the case, even as she blushed furiously. Max knew about El's obsession with cheesy romantic comedies better than

anyone; she adored any kind of on-screen romantic drama, even the soap operas with completely outlandish plots. There was just something about watching two people fall in love for the first time, regardless of the circumstances, that just got her. Although she'd learned the hard way that life was really nothing like the movies, a small part of her clung to the hope that there was someone out there who would make her truly believe in that heart-stopping, world-altering, sweep-me-off-my-feet kind of love.

And the moment she'd reached up to kiss Mike Wheeler on the cheek, that tiny bit of hope had grown ever so slightly. The whole bike ride home she tried to temper it, reminding herself that people ask people out on dates all the time, and it didn't necessarily *mean* anything, and it could still go entirely, terribly wrong. But those thoughts did little to drown out the refrain that was echoing louder and louder, the one that Max so fatefully repeated just a short while later: *It was meant to be.* Even though the implications of that terrified her, El couldn't ignore the fact that something about being around Mike had felt... *right.*

"Are you trying to knock the eraser off that pencil, or what?"

The sharp intrusion into her thoughts nearly caused El to fall off her chair and she shook her head, blinking her eyes a few times before realizing that the voice belonged to Mike: the very object of her reverie.

"I..." she started, but then their eyes met and suddenly El found she couldn't continue. It was there again, that otherworldly feeling – his warm gaze threatening to pull her in until she lost all sense of everything. Still, his expression seemed reassuring, like maybe... he was thinking the same thing. *Could he be?*

After a beat, he broke into that adorable lopsided grin she'd been dying to see again. "It's okay, I do things like that when I zone out too," he said. "I swear there's an indent on the underside of my desk from my knee bouncing against it."

El looked down at the pencil in question, having finally steadied it enough to see that the eraser was in fact starting to wear away. She laughed and some of the nervous energy dissipated.

"Yeah, I... guess I was just daydreaming," she said, hoping her voice didn't make it too obvious that he was clearly the source of her distraction.

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting," Mike replied as he began to settle in across from her. "I was taking advantage of a rare burst of writing inspiration, and I guess I lost track of time."

El tried not to stare as he shrugged off his jacket, his shoulders flexing as he did so. He was dressed in a light grey t-shirt and a navy zip-up hoodie that, though simple, still accentuated his slim build. Max had long joked that El's type was "tall, dark, and lanky", and Mike definitely fit that description, in addition to a sweep of unruly black hair, a gorgeous smile, and the kind of lips that made daydreaming about kissing *far* too easy.

El took an even breath, willing herself not to give away how much she was completely and *totally* crushing on him, at least not in the first five minutes of their date. People ask people on dates all the time, remember?

"That's okay," she said, putting the pencil down for good measure. "What were you writing, if you don't mind me asking?"

The smile on Mike's lips hinted to a secret he was trying and failing to keep. "Oh – it's... I'm working on my second novel, actually."

El couldn't help the gasp that escaped her mouth as she brought a hand to her heart. "Really?"

Mike nodded, seeming to catch some of her excitement.

"Can – I know you probably can't tell me what it's about, but is it, do you – "

Mike shook his head in a way that told her not to worry, and then he was leaning over the table, his hands clasped conspiratorially in front of him. He gave the space around them a once-over, craning his neck around the bookshelf behind El to see if anyone was lurking nearby. Apart from the soft music playing from a distant speaker and the occasional creak of the old wooden staircase at the back, Maple

Street Books was blessedly quiet that day. Mike inched forward, his head dipping low, and El followed, until the two of them were huddled like thieves over the middle of the table.

"Do you promise you won't tell anyone?" he asked.

"I promise," El breathed, both his proximity and low whisper making her heart pick up speed.

"It's about a girl with telekinetic powers," he began, "And she's trying to find one of her friends, who's gone missing in another dimension."

El was sure her eyes widened comically, but she couldn't help it; she was enraptured by Mike's ominous tone, her mind already racing with questions.

Mike seemed to sense this and he smiled a little, breaking the spell. "That's probably all I can say without risking getting sued by my publisher, but yeah... I'm excited about it. For the first time in a while, actually."

El frowned. "What makes you say that?"

Their eyes met again and Mike appeared to be searching for something in her gaze. "I... well, it was going great for a while, but then I had a serious bout of writer's block – like, so bad, I considered giving up on the whole thing. But then..." he looked down and El swore she saw a blush creeping up his neck. "I've just felt really... inspired, the past few days."

There was a heaviness to his words and El could feel the air shift, both with the weight of the secret he'd shared, and the intensity glimmering somewhere deep in his eyes.

"Well," she said, finding herself unable to break from his gaze, "I'm glad to hear that. And, I mean, it goes without saying, but I can't *wait* to read it."

That elicited yet another heart-wrenching grin from Mike. "Trust me, I can't wait to finally finish it."

Neither of them shifted away from their huddle and El wasn't sure

she wanted to, even if it was no longer necessary. To her dismay, Mike was the first to move, leaning back in his chair with a sigh. "Do you want a coffee?"

El frowned. "Uh, sure – you mean like go grab one and bring it back here?"

A mischievous look dawned over his features. "No no – there's coffee here."

El looked around, even though she was sure she'd never seen a coffee counter in the bookstore. "There is?"

Mike leaned forward and El braced for the impact of his presence again drawing close. "I'll let you in on another secret," he said in that same low tone. "I spent so much time here when I was writing *The Lab* that the staff let me have full access to their break room, which – thank God – has a coffee machine."

Before El had the chance to reply he was on his feet, the height of him hulking over her. "Cream or milk?"

"Cream."

"Any sugar?"

"Yes – three, please."

Mike laughed and though El knew why – both Max and her dad were constantly scolding her about the copious amounts of sugar she put in her coffee – she couldn't hold back her blush.

"Geez – I mean, sugar is great and all, but three?"

"Hey, don't judge," she replied, crossing her arms. "Extra sweet coffee is one of my simple indulgences."

But Mike just smiled down at her. "Alright, three it is. I'll be right back."

He disappeared behind a bookshelf, and El waited a beat before exhaling completely. It felt like the first proper breath she'd taken

since he walked in the door. It had barely been ten minutes into their date, and she could hardly keep her crush-fuelled nervous jitters under control. *God, how am I going to survive the whole thing?*

She remembered what Max had said as she was heading out the door, her final words of encouragement: Just let yourself enjoy it, El. As much as she hated to admit it, she knew what Max was getting at. El had been thoroughly disappointed by her dating prospects in the past few years, and was beginning to develop a cynical twinge toward love in general, which was, in essence, very unlike her. She'd begun to think of love – the kind she wanted – as a mirage that was out of reach, making her dread the idea of casual dating. That is, until Mike. And now there she sat, the persistent beat of her heart letting her know that despite the protests going on in her head, there was something different about him.

But she didn't have much time to contemplate what exactly, because before she knew it footsteps were falling heavily behind her, and she turned to see Mike bounding toward the table, two steaming mugs in hand.

He plunked one down in front of her with an exaggerated flair, careful not to let any of the coffee spill. It looked as though he'd already mixed everything in, but then he set down a handful of sugar packets next to the mug.

"I put three in there, like you said, but... I figured if you've got that much of a sweet tooth, you might need some backups."

My god, he's perfect.

"Thank you," El said, smiling as she peeked over to his mug. "You drink yours black? Gross," she said, scrunching her nose up for added effect.

She expected him to defend himself, but Mike just sighed in agreement. "I know, it's such a cliché for a writer, isn't it?" he replied. "But I drink so much coffee that if I added stuff every time, I'd like, wear holes in my teeth or something." He gestured to the cloth bag at El's feet and she followed his eyes. "Now that we have our fuel," he said, "I'm dying to know what you thought about the books I gave

you."

El felt herself relax a little, relieved at the prospect of the conversation shifting to something she could talk about endlessly – especially to someone who had proven he was up to listening. She leaned down, reaching into the bag to procure *The Shining*. She'd barely finished lifting it onto the table before Mike inhaled sharply, rubbing his hands together in anticipation. She smiled in spite of herself, his enthusiasm contagious.

"I knew you'd love it," Mike said, and when she looked up at him, his pure, unadorned smile made her breath catch in her throat.

She steadied herself by flipping through the pages of the book, skimming along her pencil marks and looking for the lines that would help her remember what she wanted to say.

"Well, you were spot on," she told him. She picked up her pencil and began to trace over a section, searching for the passage she wanted to talk about.

"Do you always write in books?"

El's head snapped up quickly, as though she'd been caught doing something bad, and she felt a sudden panic sweep through her. "Um – yeah, I do, but... I'm, oh wow I'm so sorry, I totally shouldn't have assumed I could write in this one, I guess I thought since you already – "

But before she could continue Mike reached across the table and placed his hand on her wrist, steadying her. The action halted everything and she felt herself relax, his touch rerouting all of her nerves toward something warm and inviting. She could feel her heart begin to pick up pace again. Thank god we're sitting down.

"No don't be sorry! It's okay, El, it's totally fine," he said. "I do it too – I was just surprised because I don't think I've ever met anyone who didn't think it was like, desecrating literature or something," he said, making air quotes around those final words.

El couldn't keep the look of amazement from her face. "Really?"

Mike nodded. "Yeah, I always have. I can't not, you know? Some lines are just so meaningful... I don't want to lose them."

There was some kind of shift in the air between them again, and El's eyes flicked down to her wrist, where Mike's hand was still softly resting. He must've sensed it because just then he yanked it away, his cheeks tinging pink with embarrassment.

"I know what you mean," El said, wanting to reassure him. "I feel the same. I don't want to miss anything."

There was another pause as they looked at each other, and El tried to read what was in his eyes. Eventually Mike nodded toward the book. "So what were the ones you didn't want to miss?"

El smiled. "Well I mean there were so many. The whole story was fantastic – and you were right, definitely scary, but just so incredibly well thought out and vivid and just..." she trailed off, her finger landing on a passage on one of the dog-eared pages. "Like this," she said, and began to read aloud: *"Monsters are real. Ghosts are too. They live inside of us, and sometimes, they win."*

She could sense Mike's enthusiastic nods before she even looked up. "Yes, yes, a classic," he said, compelling her to go on.

"And this one," El continued, *"That's your job in this hard world, to keep your love alive and see that you get on, no matter what."*

Mike let out an exaggerated exhale. "He just had that casually in a *horror novel*. God, he's a genius."

"Right? Oh, and there was another one, wait let me find it..." El flipped through the pages, acutely aware of Mike's eyes resting expectantly on her. "I feel like maybe this one isn't as memorable, and it kind of doesn't have anything to do with the big moments, but I just – I don't know, I thought it was so..." She went on to read: *"He would write it for the reason he felt that all great literature, fiction and nonfiction, was written: truth comes out, in the end it always comes out. He would write it because he felt he had to."*

She kept her eyes on the page when she finished, still as awestruck as

she'd been when she first read that line and wanted to let the moment breathe a little. Steadying herself so as not to get lost in the inviting depth of Mike's eyes, she glanced up at him after a moment – only to find him looking at her in complete and utter amazement. For a moment she wondered if she'd said or done something wrong, because his expression shifted to worried, disturbed, even. She likened it to the way someone looks when they learn that you know a secret about them. She tried to think of something to say, but Mike broke the silence before she could get there.

"I... can't believe – El that's, you just..." she waited as he struggled for words, shaking his head in awe. "That's the line that made me want to be a writer."

It wasn't necessarily a shocking revelation, but El could feel its gravity – and as she watched Mike's eyes more closely, she understood intrinsically that he'd never said those words aloud before. It was the third time that day he'd let her in on a secret, and she could feel the tendrils of this one drawing them closer in a more profound way.

"I've lent that book to all of my best friends, but no one's ever..." Mike trailed off again, still at a loss for words. "I just, I can't believe you picked up on that line."

"Why?"

"Oh, well, I because it's kind of – I mean that's not really what people think of when –"

"Oh no, not that – sorry," El interrupted, having been so mesmerized by his reaction that she'd spoken before she could think. "I mean... why did it make you want to be a writer?"

Mike frowned to himself, and El could tell he was considering the question carefully. She waited, making it all too clear that she would hang on to his every word.

A few moments passed and then Mike shrugged to himself. "I think... it made me realize I had something to say. Some kind of truth I wanted to tell."

"And what was that?"

He smiled. "Well you read *The Lab*, didn't you?" he said, a teasing hint in his tone.

"I did," El replied. "But I want to hear it directly from the source." She tried to stop herself from cringing, instantly able to hear Max's voice in her head: Top notch attempt at flirting, El.

To her relief, Mike laughed. "Alright, well in that case..."

He began what would turn out to be an hours-long conversation, starting at where his inspiration for *The Lab* came from (met by a never-ending stream of questions from El) and ending at each of them discussing their favourite books in detail, trading what they believed the inherent truths were.

As much as she loved rom-coms, there were certain tropes that El sometimes rolled her eyes at for how unrealistic they seemed – that overused notion of "The whole world falling away" being one of them. But sitting across the table from Mike then, enraptured by his every word, her heartbeat at a steady hum, that doubt began to fade. Because it really did feel like the rest of the world – at least the one inside Maple Street Books – had become less important, muted, until it was only her and Mike at that little table; their coffee mugs empty, an ethereal energy buzzing between them.

A good while later – El truly had no sense of how long they'd been sitting there – someone came up to their table, and to El's embarrassment, she was so absorbed in Mike that it took her a full minute to even register the person's presence. She watched as Mike looked up and smiled at the guy that El eventually recognized as the one who'd been working behind the drop-off counter last week.

"How's it going, Dan?" Mike asked.

"Pretty good," Dan responded, glancing between the two of them. "Hate to break this up, but we're closing for the day."

Mike's disappointment was palpable and he sighed, looking apologetically at El. She shrugged and reached for her bag. "No

worries, we'll head out," he said, and Dan nodded, collecting their coffee mugs before disappearing again.

El pulled her jean jacket on. She still felt dazed, as though she'd just been woken from a dream. Mike gestured for her to lead the way out and she did, wincing a little when she felt his hand brush the small of her back gently as they shuffled through the door. The movement must've startled Mike because, much to El's dismay, his hand was gone a second later. Without thinking, she reached behind her, hand outstretched, until her fingers connected with his palm. Acting on instinct, she linked their hands together and guided Mike along as they cleared the entrance way. Simple as it was, for El it was a bold move; but despite her erratic heartbeat, she felt calm - like Mike's touch grounded her in the exact right way.

Mike stepped up beside her once they were outside, and when he tightened his grip on her hand and looked down at her with that lopsided grin, it was all she could do not to swoon.

"Did you bike again?" he asked.

El could only nod, and they walked around the side of the building to where she'd parked her bike, the same spot as the week before. El made no move to reach for it; letting go of Mike's hand was the last thing she felt like doing. And it was like he read her mind, because just then he turned toward her, reaching for her other hand until they were facing each other, fingers intertwined.

Mike spoke first. "So, um... I – I would really..." his cheeks flushed red and before El could think twice, she blurted out the sentence that had been running circles in her head since they left the bookstore.

"I really want to see you again," she said, instantly aware of how breathless she sounded. *God, I'm helpless.*

But there was no time to be embarrassed, because Mike smiled so wide in response that there was no doubt he'd been wanting to say the same thing. "Me too – I do too," he replied, and it was El's turn to give a knowing smile.

"Maybe we can meet here again, and decide what we want to do?" El

asked, hoping he'd get the hint that she wanted to avoid their date getting cut short again.

"Sounds good," he said, and El felt him tighten his grip on her hands, tugging her a little closer. "Sunday?"

She nodded, letting herself be pulled in to him. "Sunday," she replied, her voice a near whisper.

And then he was stooping down a little, and El began to stretch up on her toes, knowing innately what was going to happen next as she met his dark gaze and allowed herself for the first time to get totally lost in it, lost until –

A car horn blared from close by, so loud that they both startled, jumping apart (but, El noted, not letting go of one another's grasp). They both whipped around, searching for the source of the disruption, when a voice called out from somewhere across the street.

"Mike, this is a tow away zone!"

El frowned in confusion, and after a moment Mike seemed to register what was going on. He sighed and shook his head as though he wasn't surprised. "Good god," he muttered, turning further around to the direction of where the voice was coming from.

"Alright, Dustin, I'm coming!" he shouted before turning back to El. "I'm so sorry, I let my friends borrow my car to run errands, and I told them to pick me up down the street, but I don't think they – they're not exactly... subtle."

El laughed, peeking over his shoulder to see a curly-haired guy sitting in the driver's seat of an old station wagon, apparently the source of the blaring horn. She noticed there were two other guys in the backseat, both of whom appeared to be pressed up against the window, stretching to see what was holding Mike up.

"It's okay," she said, meeting his eyes again. Whatever had surged between them had passed, and though El was disappointed, the promise of what was to come lingered, sending shivers down her spine. "I'll see you Sunday?"

Mike nodded, reluctantly releasing her hands as El stepped back toward her bike. "Sunday," he echoed.

El climbed onto the seat, watching as Mike hurried across the street toward the parked car. Before biking away, she heard the curly-haired guy exclaim, "We saved you the front seat!", to which Mike responded with an exasperated groan.

The ride home was a complete blur, her mind and heart full of everything *Mike*, his words, and smile, and the feeling of his large hands clasped so tightly in hers. When she arrived back at her apartment she tried to tiptoe in, knowing that Max was home but wanting, at least for a few moments, to savour the afternoon to herself a little bit longer. She wanted to live out one of her favourite rom-com scenes, where the female protagonist shuts her bedroom door after returning home from a date, and collapses onto the bed in a fit of love-fuelled giddiness. But of course, life rarely happened like the movies, and she'd barely shut the front door before Max was bounding towards her, all excitement and energetic questioning before El could process what was going on.

It turned out she didn't have to. Max took one look at her face and, after a bout of howling laughter, exclaimed, "Oh my god, you are in love!"

3. Chapter 3

A/N: Hello to anyone who still remembers/potentially cares about this little three-shot! I'm SO sorry for how long this took to get out, but here we FINALLY are: 4k+ words of rom-com Mileven goodness to hopefully make up for some of the long wait! Enjoy!

"I cannot *believe* you interrupted us like that! What are we, in middle school?!"

Mike clasped his hands together and rested them at the back of his head, sighing in frustration. To his annoyance, his friends just kept laughing, amused rather than apologetic, like he'd been hoping for.

"For the millionth time, I didn't want to get another ticket — on *your* car, for that matter," Dustin said, the same explanation he'd been giving since Mike reamed them out on the way home from Maple Street Books. "We passed a cop car on the way to pick you up, and I got spooked! I'm still paying off the one from last month."

They all lived in a rented townhouse together, but Mike was the only one with a car. It was the only major indulgence he'd purchased with the modest bit of money he made from sales of *The Lab*. He didn't mind lending it to Dustin, Will or Lucas — they weren't just his roommates, but his best and closest friends since childhood, after all — but sometimes they were a little careless, namely when it came to parking rules. Mike would admit he wasn't the best behind the wheel, but none of them could claim to be either; he figured it had to do with the fact that they biked rather than drove everywhere for most of their growing years.

"Anyway, Mike," Lucas piped up, "I don't think we ruined your chances entirely. You two were getting pretty cozy.... at least, it looked that way from the backseat."

The three of them laughed again in that teasing way, stoking Mike's surly mood. But before he could say anything, Will spoke up. "Yeah Mike, when are you seeing her again?"

He glanced at them from his spot in the kitchen; they were all seated at the table, but in his frustration Mike had been up pacing the room. Their expectant, if hopeful, expressions made his anger wane a little. "Sunday," he answered.

Lucas let out a low whistle and Mike glared at him, hoping the stern look would convey that he was *really* not in the mood for more teasing. Evidently, it didn't work.

"So I mean..." Dustin began, tentatively looking at Mike. "What's the deal? I know getting details from you about girls is like pulling teeth, but was it a good date? Is she *'the one'*?" he asked, adding a deep, radio announcer-style tone to those last words.

"Dustin!" he exclaimed, his eyes widening in shock. He cleared his throat, desperate to quell the words that had come forward with such ferocity he nearly had to bite his tongue to keep them in: *Yeah. She might be.*

Intellectually, he *knew* it was crazy to be thinking that after just one date. But another part of him — the one he accessed when he was writing, filling the pages with stories of real and imagined worlds — wondered if maybe it made more sense than anything ever had before. His mind could chatter endlessly about how it couldn't be, how he was no good at dating and romance, but beneath all of that was something stronger: a pull that said yes instead of no. A deep knowing, that for once he couldn't quite find the right words for.

He realized he'd gone quiet for far too long, and he looked at his friends, attempting to present an air of nonchalance in spite of the flush he could feel creeping up his neck. It was useless. They collectively burst out laughing, Dustin howling and slapping the table so hard it shook.

"Oh man," he gasped out eventually, "You're a *total* goner!"

"Wait, okay let me get this straight... they *honked* at you?"

El was sprawled across her bed, resting against the pillows opposite from Max, who sat cross-legged by her feet.

"Yeah. Well, no, I guess they didn't honk at us, they more so... I'm not sure if they realized we were about to—" El stopped, suddenly shy, though she knew there was no reason to be. It was true, they were *definitely* about to kiss, and the thought of it made her heart race all over again. She hoped that on Sunday they'd get to finish what they started.

"About to what? Exchange a high five? Come on, El," Max teased, squeezing her ankle affectionately. They both laughed. "Well, I hope they're nowhere near you guys on Sunday," she added, "Because you'll totally be sucking face with reckless abandon."

"Max!" El squealed, using her foot to nudge her friend's knee in a scolding manner.

"What! I'm just speaking the truth! If this guy doesn't kiss you, you might spontaneously combust. And I really don't think he wants to see that."

El smiled. As much as she loathed the teasing sometimes, Max knew her better than anyone, and she couldn't be more right this time. It was only a few days away, but already El was antsy with anticipation for Sunday. The feeling she had in Mike's presence — that weighted pull into his orbit — was unlike anything she'd ever experienced, and she wanted to feel it again. She wanted to feel it *always*, but she couldn't say that yet, not even to Max.

"But seriously," Max continued as she crawled up to where El was, laying next to her so they were shoulder to shoulder. "I've never seen you like this before. And that's a *good* thing. You deserve this."

The sincerity of her words made El emotional, and she pursed her lips, overcome with appreciation for her friend. "Thanks, Max," she said in a quiet voice.

Max smiled. "Anytime. Now let's break down what that kiss is going to be like!"

Mike arrived at Maple Street Books first, turning toward the bike rack at the side of the building instead of going inside. He leaned back

against the cool brick wall, propping his foot up behind him, only to put it back down a second later. That pose would exude a too-cool-for-everyone vibe, and that *definitely* wasn't what he was going for. Not that he ever was, but still — he didn't want El to get that impression. But he also didn't exactly want her to sense his eagerness either, his palpable crush that had only intensified since their first date. He also hoped she wouldn't find it creepy that he was waiting for her at the spot where they'd almost kissed.

He sighed, closing his eyes to try to slow the pace of his mind. All of those thoughts were just too much, and they were making him even more nervous than he already was. He steadied his breathing, readjusting the shoulder bag he'd brought along, the one that usually contained notebooks and scrap pieces of paper with bits of his writing. It was also a source of his worries: there was something in there he wanted to give to El, and he had no idea how she was going to take it, or if she'd take it at all.

But he didn't have much time to contemplate this, because just then he noticed some movement ahead and he squinted, realizing it was El approaching on her bike. She was coasting down the sloping road that ran adjacent to the bookstore, her hair billowing softly behind her. She had on the same faded jean jacket, but this time she wore a simple black t-shirt dress underneath, with buttons that stopped just before her waist. Mike smiled when he noticed that she paired it all with faded white Converse sneakers.

She was beautiful. She was *way* more than beautiful, actually — she was a word that hadn't even been invented yet, but Mike, being a writer, vowed he would invent it because any other adjective was just *lame* next to her, each of them falling flat: *gorgeous*, *stunning*... "Pretty."

"Hope you weren't waiting lo — what?"

Mike scrambled to register what had happened; lost in his awestruck reverie, he hadn't realized he said the word out loud, and that she was close enough to hear it. She stood at the bike rack clutching her handlebars, her face a little flushed.

"You look really pretty," Mike blurted, the words coming out in a

jumbled rush. "I... that's what I meant to say."

Great. Well done, Mike. Off to a great start.

"Oh," El replied, blushing as she met his eyes. "Thanks, I — that's... so do you."

Mike raised his eyebrows. He'd never been called pretty before, and he wasn't exactly sure if it was a compliment. But it came from El, so he wasn't complaining.

She must've noticed his surprise because she bit her lip in concern, shaking her head in a rush to correct herself. "I — I don't mean pretty like.... well I mean I do, you *are* pretty, I just meant that you also look..."

Mike stepped forward then, placing his hands gently over hers. "It's okay," he said. "I know what you mean. And thank you." She looked up at him and they both smiled.

He helped place her bike on the rack, hovering one of his hands over hers so that when they were done, he interlaced them. He knew it probably didn't seem all that casual, but the idea of not being close to her in some way was too overwhelming for him to care.

"So, I was thinking we could go for a walk," Mike said. "The river's not too far from here, and there's this nice park along one section of it."

El was already nodding. "I'd love that," she replied, stepping in close to his side. "Lead the way."

They stopped at a coffee shop a few blocks away, one Mike had never been to but El claimed to frequent. She swore they had the best lattes in town, and insisted on treating him to one despite his protests. "It's only fair, since you worked your magic to get us coffee at Maple Street," she told him.

"Alright," he said as they left with their to-go cups in hand. "But then you have to promise to let me get it next time." He cringed, worrying instantly that he was being too forward, insinuating there would be a

next time when they weren't even through their second date.

But El's shy smile reassured him, and she looped her hand through the crook of his arm as they walked on. "If you say so."

They headed toward the river, exchanging details about their lives, discussing where they grew up, who their friends were, and what they studied in school. Mike learned that El was working towards a degree in social work, having started college a few years later than usual. She seemed to pause on these facts, choosing her words in such a way that let Mike know there was more to the story, one he'd hopefully hear someday. He wanted to know all of her, but the part of him that remained rational (albeit small) knew it would take time, which was okay. He would wait.

It struck Mike that they were running through the topics most people usually covered on the first date. They'd been so absorbed in conversation about literature and the meanings in their favourite books, that they hadn't even touched on basic information. But strangely enough, this didn't feel like a problem. The depth of those first conversations had felt right, and completely natural, like they were getting to things they really *wanted* to get to. Now the catching up felt more meaningful, like they were gathering details of each other while armed with the knowledge of what lay beneath it all, what they wanted and hoped to explore.

They reached the top of a hill from which the river could be seen, glittering in the unseasonably warm fall day. Mike steered them in the direction of the park, which was dotted with wide, comfortable wood benches. They sat down at one and El moved her hands away from his arm, much to Mike's dismay; he noticed the warmth of her touch more acutely in its absence. He shrugged the bag off his shoulder, figuring now was as good a time as ever to give her what was inside.

"Hey so... I brought you something," he mumbled, rummaging through the bag so he wouldn't have to look at her and potentially lose his nerve.

When he found what he was looking for he turned to her, meekly presenting the handful of stapled papers. She placed her hand

tentatively on the edge Mike wasn't holding, not pulling it all the way toward her as she waited for him to explain.

"It's the first chapter of my new novel," he said, his voice quivering with an onset of nerves.

He watched as realization swept over El's features, her mouth stretching into a soft smile, her brown eyes lighting up in a way that made Mike determined to be the cause of it happening again and again. *Possibly forever*, he thought.

"Mike!" she said, gently tugging the sheaf of paper into both hands. "This is — I'm... wow."

"I thought you might like to read it, I mean I don't know if — you don't have to, it's not like —"

"Are you kidding? Mike..." El said, looking up at him. She squeezed his upper arm lightly, letting her hand linger there. "I'm honoured. I... I can't believe you trust me with this."

"Is there a reason I shouldn't?" he said, laughing a little.

El shook her head. "I mean, I could *totally* leak this somehow," she said, flipping through the pages. "You know, just call up some magazine and sell it and be gone without a trace."

Mike could see the smile tugging at the corner of her lips, and the fact that she was trying to hold it back made him laugh more. She was terrible at lying. "Well in that case," he replied, playing along, "At least I'd know who did it, and then I could come after you for all you're worth."

"Hmm, I don't know about that," El said, turning to smile at him before glancing back at the pages. "Can I read a bit of this?"

"Right now?"

"Yeah, I mean, if that's okay with you. Just a few pages. I just... I can't wait." She seemed shy at those last words, but in that moment, Mike couldn't think of a better compliment.

"Of course," he told her. "Go for it."

She turned intently to the first page, and Mike tried to relax against the bench as he watched her from the corner of his eye. He'd never shared his writing like this before, him present as someone read his words right next to him — and the fact that it was El sent a thrilling twist of nerves and excitement down his spine. He stayed as still as possible, not wanting to disturb her; she read with careful attention, her head bent, a concerted pinch between her eyebrows.

It was intimate in a way Mike had never experienced. His writing always felt like the deepest part of him, the one corner of his heart that no one could ever quite reach. Of course people could read and engage with it, but the process by which it was produced and the meaning behind each word was sacred to Mike, in a solitary way that he enjoyed. He never imagined he could share that with someone, let alone someone he was beginning to fall for. But with El it felt right; like she saw that lone part of him and invited herself in, eager to take in every detail.

After what Mike guessed was the fifth or sixth page she lifted her head, and the look in her eyes was enough to make his breath catch: The only way to describe it was completely, utterly mesmerized.

"Mike..." she began, her voice a near whisper. She held the pages against her chest, as though they were too precious to be anywhere else. "It's so good. I — I don't even know what to say. You're so talented."

"Thanks," Mike managed to reply.

She reached over to place a hand on his knee, and he nearly jumped at the contact. "No, I *mean* it. This is — it's incredible, and I know it's going to be an amazing book. I'm hooked already."

Mike smiled, covering her hand with his. "Thank you, seriously. That means a lot, because I've been kind of struggling with it for the last little while."

"Really? I mean, I have no idea what being a writer is like, but whatever it is, I couldn't tell."

Mike sighed, knowing what the answer was: the romantic sub-plot. Even though he felt like he could tell El anything, he didn't think it was a great thing to bring up while on a date with her. *Yeah, actually, I'm struggling with writing romance because, you know, I'm terrible at that stuff and can't even imagine it well enough to create a good storyline.* Nope. Not a good call.

So instead he shrugged, settling for some version of the truth. "Yeah, I guess just some aspects of the plot have been... difficult," he told her.

"Well, whatever it is, I'm sure it'll be fine. You're an amazing writer. You'll figure it out."

And for the first time since he started the book, Mike actually believed it.

They stayed on the bench for a while, discussing the timeline for the book, Mike trying and failing not to give hints about the plot and how he imagined it panning out. Eventually they decided to head to the river and walk down a good length of it before looping back up to Maple Street Books.

They walked hand in hand, the conversation still flowing comfortably, Mike dreading the thought of the date ending. He tried to focus on the moment, the feeling of El beside him, the sweet sound of her voice.

"Oh, I forgot to ask you," he said, remembering something from their first date. "You said you hadn't read much horror, or Stephen King type stuff before. What kind of genre do you usually go for?"

He sensed that she was considering her words carefully. "Well, it's kind of embarrassing I guess, but..." she trailed off, blushing again in that adorable way. "I love romance. Rom-coms, usually, mainly in the form of movies, but books too. It's kind of... my guilty pleasure, I guess." The words came out in a rush, as though she were equally excited and nervous to say them.

Great, Mike thought, You're totally hopeless and she's an expert. But he squeezed her hand, determined not to let his hesitation show. "That's

nothing to be embarrassed about," he told her, "It's a great genre. In fact, it's kind of..." he trailed off, his mind getting ahead of him. Even though it seemed kind of personal, El had told him the truth when he asked. He felt he owed it to her to do the same, both because he wanted to be honest with her, but also because maybe... maybe she could help.

"You know when I said there are parts of the new book I've been struggling with?" he began, watching as El nodded. He sighed. "It's this romantic sub-plot I started, that my agent suggested. I know it's a good thing to have in the story and I want it to work, but... I'm not very good at it — the writing of it, I mean," he added, even though that was only part of the truth.

"I see," El replied, luckily not appearing to be put off. "What about it are you finding difficult?"

Mike racked his brain, piecing together the fragments he'd written of it so far. "I guess... I mean, I'm used to sci-fi and action — that's my thing. So any romance-driven stuff, it feels like I'm writing it all in clichés, you know?"

"Well," she said, glancing up at him with a smile. "Lucky for you, I'm a romance *expert*."

Mike laughed in an attempt to offset his nerves. "Alright then, walk me through it. What makes a good romantic story?"

El huffed out a breath, her face returning to the same expression she'd had when reading Mike's work earlier. "Well... it has to be meaningful. Like, it has to relate to the development of both characters somehow. Falling in love is one thing, but when it's in a story, I think it's supposed to teach the reader something."

"Okay, I see," Mike said, taking in her words carefully.

"And it has to be... human, and *real*. No one is perfect. Love is definitely not perfect, and it can be annoying when it's presented like it's all sunshine and rainbows."

"Right, okay. That is annoying."

"It totally is!" El exclaimed, and her growing excitement made Mike break into a grin. "But what's also really annoying is when characters fall in love, and then there's conflict for no reason. That has to feel genuine too — it has to make sense for them, and the plot."

"Alright, got it," Mike replied. He held up a hand and counted off each point with his fingers. "So, the romance has to help develop both characters, not gloss over the tough parts, and any conflict has to make sense."

"Yes, exactly," El said. She leaned into his side, nudging him a little. "See? You're getting there."

"All thanks to you," he said, smiling at her. "We have to cover tropes, though — which ones are a no-go?"

They turned away from the river and started back up the sloping hill toward the bookstore, only a few blocks away now. For the rest of the walk, El ran through some major romantic clichés, explaining the ones she liked and disliked. Love triangles, for example, fell into the *absolutely not* category, whereas a storyline of childhood friends falling in love as teenagers was fine, so long as it was well written. Mike catalogued each one in his mind, and as he listened it was hard not to imagine him and El — the two main characters in their own love story, one Mike was already beginning to write in his mind.

When Maple Street Books came into view his stomach sank, a signifier that the date was coming to an end. El seemed to feel the same, having gone quiet next to him. When they rounded the side of the building, she spoke up again.

"About all the romance stuff — I forgot to mention one thing," she said, turning to face Mike as they sidled up next to the bike rack.

"Oh yeah? What is it?"

"It's about kissing," she said, looking right up into his eyes.

Oh god. Mike cleared his throat. "Oh?"

El nodded. "It always seems like one character initiates it... and depending on how it happens, I guess that can be kind of nice." She

stepped closer to Mike, reaching for his other hand so they were standing the same way they'd been a few days earlier. "But I think it's better when... when it's more in sync."

Mike glanced down to see that she was on her tiptoes, her face rising closer to his. His mind whirred as all of his senses kicked into overdrive, but he leaned down a little, managing to follow her lead. "So you mean like..." he said softly, watching as her eyes darkened. "Meeting in the middle?"

"Yes," El breathed, the last word she spoke before her lips met his — before they were finally, *finally* kissing.

Up until that point, Mike had been taking El in bit by slow bit: in the quick glances, tentative hand-holding, the shy exchange of smiles. The kiss, then, felt like one big rush; everything El pouring over him at once — her hands, set firm on his shoulders, the silky brown hair he pushed out of the way as he cupped the side of her face, pulling her close. She was an *incredible* kisser. Mike thought of all the romantic kisses she'd probably watched and read about, and he wondered fleetingly if she'd absorbed her talent by osmosis. The thought made him smile, the quirk of his lips causing El to pull back a little.

"What?" she asked, just as breathless as Mike was.

He closed his eyes, leaning his forehead against hers. "Nothing, I'm just... just — *wow*."

El chuckled softly, looping her hands around Mike's neck. "That's what I meant, about meeting in the middle. It's good when it's like that."

"Mhmm," Mike hummed in reply. "What else is good?" he asked, grateful that their faces were close enough that she couldn't see how much he was blushing.

He worried that the question was too forward, but then he felt El move a little, nudging him backward. He stepped back and she shuffled forward, guiding them toward the brick wall behind them. "Sometimes," she whispered, pressing close into Mike when his back

reached the wall, "Sometimes it's good like this," she said before leaning up to kiss him again.

The knowledge that they were technically still in public felt like an afterthought as Mike let himself get lost in her again, wrapping his arms around her waist so she didn't have to stretch upwards too much. El moved her hands to the front of his jacket and bunched the material in her fists, the kiss tinged with more intensity than before. Anything could've happened around them — hell, Maple Street Books could be burning down at that very second, and Mike wouldn't have noticed, or even cared. He was kissing El, and it was maybe, possibly, the best thing he'd ever done in his life.

El, who likely had far more sense, pulled away eventually. She looked up with a smile that was all for him, and in an instant his mind formed the clearest thought he'd had in months: *I'm in love with her.* He was almost scared to hold her gaze, afraid his eyes would give everything away.

"Mike..." she said, her voice testing waters he was sure he was already in. "I'm — this was a *really* good day. I feel like... I — I've never felt..." her face began to contort with worry, but Mike was already nodding with reassurance.

"I know, El," he said, "Me neither. I mean, I've never felt like this before either."

She beamed at him, and Mike could picture just how they would look to a passerby: two completely lovesick people, gazing at each other like the rest of the world didn't exist. As far as Mike was concerned, it didn't; at least his world, which in the span of a week or so, El had single handedly shifted on its axis.

"So do you think your romantic sub-plot is going to work out now?"

Mike feigned surprise, making it seem as though he was seriously contemplating the question. "Hmmm... I think I still need some advice. Are you free for a consultation this week?"

El's smile only grew wider. "Of course. I am the expert, after all."

"You are," Mike replied. "And I think you'll have to stick around, because I'm not sure I'll be able to see my book all the way through without you."

El leaned up so that her forehead rested against his again. Her voice was quiet, her words soft against his lips. "I can do that."

Thank you for reading, and please leave reviews! As always, don't hesitate to come say hi on my Tumblr, maplestreet :)